

Almost by **TheMikeWheelers** (jasongracefully)

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Summary:

"I never gave up on you."

Almost.

Almost never.

That was the part left unspoken, the part he didn't need to tell El right now. Maybe in the future when the adrenaline of the night had gone away, maybe then he'd tell her about the "almost" right before she returned.

Almost

"I never gave up on you."

Mike almost choked on those words. It's not like they weren't true, but he couldn't help but feel like he was breaking some code, some ancient promise to tell her everything.

(Friends don't lie.)

It wasn't really a lie. He didn't give up on her. Night after night he spent in that blanket fort, calling out for her and desperate to know if she was okay. Not once during all those nights did he think she was dead, if anything he was worried she was alive. That she was in the Upside Down, that she was in the lab, that she was suffering.

Even when he felt like he was crazy. Even when he hit day 50, day 100, day 150, day 200, and on and on and on. No matter what happened, he never once believed she was really gone. She couldn't be. She was Eleven, the fighter, the warrior, the survivor. She couldn't just *die* that easily.

Sometimes it was just deluded hope, they called it the "denial" stage of grief, but Mike refused to believe it was that. That wasn't the reason he couldn't accept El was gone, it was so much more than that.

It was the fact that she'd already survived so much. It was the fact that he watched her flip a van and kill dozens of government workers in seconds. It was the fact that he knew how powerful she was, it's not like the Demogorgon could kill her. It was powerful itself, sure, but Will survived it, and he didn't even have any powers. So how could it kill El?

But even then, Mike was lying to himself. El's power may be part of the reason he couldn't believe she was dead, but that wasn't the whole thing. It was the fact that she sacrificed herself, she wouldn't do that knowing she would die, would she? It was the fact that every time he spoke into that Supercom, he couldn't help but feel like she was listening, like her presence had graced the room in ways he

didn't understand but was still willing to believe.

More than anything, it was the fact that he had promised to keep her safe, he refused to believe he broke that promise.

(It means something you can't break. Ever.)

Mike didn't break promises, especially not to El. Over 300 days came and went with every sign pointing to her death, but he was still adamant about every promise he'd yet to fulfill to her.

There were moments of grief, of hopelessness, of despair, of desperation. But at the end of every day, his mindset was that El was out there. His brain and his logic didn't point to it, but as smart as Mike was, he was always one to follow his heart first and foremost. And his heart pointed to El.

(I never gave up on you.)

Almost.

Almost never.

That was the part left unspoken, the part he didn't need to tell El right now. Maybe in the future when the adrenaline of the night had gone away, maybe then he'd tell her about the "almost" right before she returned.

Mike didn't want to lie to El, but that statement was inherently a lie. I *never* gave up on you. "Never" is a strong word. Mike had heard about a lot of strong words in his life. "Hate" was one, "love" was another, but these two words didn't even begin to feel as a strong and conclusive as words like "never" and "always". Could Mike really say he *never* gave up on El?

He almost never gave up on her. He rarely gave up on her. He didn't give up on her. That last one was best, short and simple, gives his overall feelings without making promises that words like "never" couldn't keep.

If El had come back yesterday, or even just a few hours ago, he could say he never gave up on her and have it be completely true and

honest. But in reality it was like some abhorrent moment of fate stepped in. El came back just when he began to doubt, like this whole time God or fate or whatever twisted being was controlling this was just waiting for Mike to lose all hope before sending El back to him.

How could he not lose hope? He saw those Demodogs, the way they pounced and devoured and killed. He just narrowly avoided being killed by them himself, in fact he would have died if it weren't for a sacrifice.

If it weren't for Bob's sacrifice.

It was eerie really. Mike had looked through the doors of Hawkins Lab and saw Bob's bloodied corpse, but all he could think about was a year ago, to the last time someone had sacrificed themselves to these monsters to save him. If it ended in bloodshed this time, why was he so naive to believe it hadn't went the same way last year?

These Demodogs weren't animals, they were monsters. Mike kept having to remind himself of that, because animals are a part of nature, they're normal, they can be stopped. Monsters are a force of evil so great that people, no matter how strong, are weak to them, and sometimes not even the strongest hero can stop them.

(She stopped it. She saved us.)

Mike saw the way those Demodogs hurt Bob, and they were only the baby versions of the Demogorgon El faced. If the infant could do that to Bob, why was Mike still believing it's parent couldn't have killed El? Sitting in the Byers' kitchen once they got out, all that was playing in his mind was the parallels between El and Bob.

After over 350 days of calling and hoping and believing, Mike gave up. There was no way El could have survived that. There was no way anyone could have survived that.

Yet here she was, alive and in his arms. Mike was too shocked to wonder what happened or question any of it, he just hugged her as if she might disappear again. He wanted her to know that he held onto hope even when everything told him not to. That's how strongly he believed in her.

"I never gave up on you."

Almost never.

Those moments of doubt right before she returned didn't matter. It wasn't a lie to ignore them, he could tell her someday, but all that mattered now was that she knew about his faith in her.

"I called you every night."